

Preface

An earlier manuscript for this book first took shape as a consideration of the life and career of the little-known fifteenth-century Sieneese painter Francesco di Bartolomeo Alfei, against the background of his involvement with the *Fraternita di Santa Maria degli Angeli e Compagnia di San Francesco*: a lay confraternity that was associated with the ‘frati minori’ of San Francesco in Siena. According to surviving records, Francesco di Bartolomeo Alfei accepted a commission to fresco a chapel that was owned by that confraternity, but for some reason reneged on his contract and subsequently abandoned the project altogether.

My curiosity was raised as to why Francesco di Bartolomeo Alfei should have been selected to work for what appeared to be one of the leading Franciscan confraternities in mid-fifteenth century Siena. This seemed even more puzzling in the light of evidence that two of Francesco di Bartolomeo Alfei’s better known contemporaries – Giovanni di Paolo and Sano di Pietro – were commissioned around the same time to carry out work for the same group of lay religious on the same site.

My initial research focussed on setting the fifteenth-century confraternity in the context of the earliest followers of Francis of Assisi in Siena and the groups of lay religious that were associated with the new conventual complex and basilica of San Francesco that began to rise just outside the city walls during the second half of the thirteenth century.

Amongst other things, I was intent on establishing where confraternity members met and how they furnished the spaces in which they assembled or gathered together to offer their religious devotions. One late sixteenth-century record stood out in that context. This document, which was drawn up in January 1578/9 and inserted in a register of what was increasingly referred to as the *Compagnia di San Bernardino*, concerned an old altarpiece of the *Madonna* which was at that date displayed on the lower floor of that confraternity’s oratory on the ‘sacrato’ (the original open space or square) of the conventual church of San Francesco. According to the 1579 record, during restoration work it had been noted that an inscription on the altarpiece’s frame had included the date 1277.¹ I was curious to

¹ Archivio Storico di Siena (hereafter ASSi), *Patrimonio Resti* (hereafter *Patri. resti*), 215, old fol. 120r. (new pencil fol. 132r.).

find out more about this old image; and, in particular, to discover why it was that it was apparently being re-modelled in the sixteenth century with the intention of displaying it in one of two oratories belonging to a group of Franciscan lay religious. While the 1579 record made no mention of the artist who had originally painted the altarpiece of the *Madonna*, its recorded date surely set it in the ambit of Guido da Siena, or of one of his followers, such as Dietisalvi di Speme. The fact that it was clearly revered by a group of lay religious associated with the Friars Minor of San Francesco in Siena, who (in 1579) were assembling under the *titulus* Compagnia di San Bernardino, also opened up the possibility that it might originally have been produced for the thirteenth-century antecedents of that company.

This stimulated me not only to broaden my enquiries about the furnishings and fittings of confraternal spaces associated with the Franciscan friars, but also to revisit the long-standing debate surrounding the so-called ‘Master of San Bernardino’ *Virgin and Child* that is currently displayed in the Pinacoteca Nazionale in Siena.² Rather than being painted (as is still argued) in 1262, might the ‘Master of San Bernardino’ *Virgin and Child* in fact have been produced over a decade later? Could it be that the 1579 record offered an opportunity to lay to rest conflicting opinions that have been in circulation for decades, if not centuries; not only about the date at which the ‘Master of San Bernardino’ altarpiece was painted but also about the space in which the image itself was first displayed? This opened up a much wider field of research: one that took me some distance from the mid-fifteenth-century commission to Francesco di Bartolomeo Alfei to decorate the chapel of the Fraternita di Santa Maria degli Angeli e Compagnia di San Francesco. Indeed, it seemed that a quite different book was beginning to take shape.

That aside, digging beyond the records concerning Francesco di Bartolomeo Alfei’s relationship with the Fraternita di Santa Maria degli Angeli e Compagnia di San Francesco, I had also begun to realise that there was another field of research that begged consideration: one that set the life and career of Francesco di Bartolomeo Alfei in the context of his association with leading members of Siennese society, including representatives of the central government itself.

Not the least of these government officials was the Siennese patrician and diplomat, Leonardo Benvoglianti, who referred to the painter Francesco di Bartolomeo Alfei as if he were a personal friend. This invited consideration of how these two men might have met. Given Leonardo Benvoglianti’s position as a career diplomat serving the Republic of Siena, it was also tempting to explore the internal workings and vocabulary of fifteenth-century Siennese diplomacy.³

² Torriti, *La Pinacoteca nazionale*, vol. 1, pp. 22–23, no. 16.

³ For an impressive and recent collection of essays in this field, see Azzolini and Lazzarini, eds. *Italian Renaissance Diplomacy*. See also Lazzarini, *Communication and Conflict* and “Lettere, minute, registri”.

More seams of research ripe for further exploration opened up in the light of evidence that Francesco di Bartolomeo Alfei himself assumed a number of official government posts from a relatively early stage in his career. As such, he appears to have assumed the role of informer and mediator, monitoring and keeping the peace in communes outside Siena.

One record in particular caught my attention. This was a letter in Francesco di Bartolomeo Alfei's hand, which was despatched from Rigomagno in 1460. The contents of this letter showed that the artist was not only involved at that date in government service as 'vicario' (secular vicar, officiating deputy, delegate or stand-in head official) in a subject Sieneese commune, but that he was already skilled as a scribe and diplomatic mediator.⁴

This catapulted me into an analysis of Francesco di Bartolomeo Alfei's employment as servant of the Republic of Siena. Further archival searches revealed how Francesco di Bartolomeo Alfei may in effect have been serving the Republic's military machine by carrying out surveying work for them in the far reaches of Sieneese territory as an 'esploratore' (a term frequently adopted in the context of surveillance or spying). This appeared to support a notion I was developing that the artist's journeyman painting could have been a convenient mantle to assume whilst engaged in undercover work.

Other enquiries indicated that Francesco di Bartolomeo Alfei's familiarity and association with central government officials and other leading figures of his day depended not so much upon his professional training as an artist but on his ability as a scribe. Most curious of all – as the opening quote in the book is intended to illustrate – was the reference in the artist's own tax declaration in 1491 to a personal debt that was owed him by Sinolfo Ottieri.

That individual had not only served as Sieneese ambassador to Rome by 1491, but was also a descendent of the powerful Ottieri clan that had only recently been persuaded into alliance with Siena. Indeed, as a direct result of that, the Ottieri's eponymous castle and seat of power – Castello Ottieri, to the south of the city – was ferociously besieged by forces hostile to Siena during the 1450s.

While it thus remained clear that setting the *Fraternita di Santa Maria degli Angeli e Compagnia di San Francesco* in its historical context constituted an important part of an analysis of Francesco di Bartolomeo's life and artistic career, there were other factors that were not only intriguing, but invited more in-depth analysis.

Key earlier publications in the same field include Mattingly, *Renaissance Diplomacy* and Frigo, ed. *Politics and Diplomacy*. For an overall introduction to Leonardo Benvoglianti, see Bartolomei Romagnoli, "Lo spazio simbolico", pp. 474–78.

⁴ ASSi, *Concistoro* 1999, no. 27.



Setting the detailed research on the lay religious of San Francesco and the origins and history of the *Fraternita di Santa Maria degli Angeli e Compagnia di San Francesco* on one side, I began to investigate how the life and art of Francesco di Bartolomeo Alfei might better be understood in terms of his involvement in political diplomacy and military strategy as an agent of the fifteenth-century Republic of Siena.

In terms of editorial niceties, the title of the present book might thus more appropriately have been *The Government Service and Art of Francesco di Bartolomeo Alfei*. However, as I attempt to show, these two threads of activity were not only interchangeable but inextricably entwined. As it stands, the book explores in detail how Francesco di Bartolomeo Alfei embarked on a number of different kinds of activities, following the aborted *Fraternita di Santa Maria degli Angeli e Compagnia di San Francesco* commission: on the one hand, employed to carry out relatively low-key and roving decoration work on the walls and public spaces of the Republic's subjugated territories, as well as acting as a surveyor, mapping territorial confines; on the other, assuming fixed-term employment as a government official (during which he was apparently relieved of the brief to carry out journeyman painting). But in each case, there is evidence to show that Francesco di Bartolomeo Alfei felt obliged to despatch formal reports back to the central government in Siena, detailing how matters stood locally in a particular commune and more generally in surrounding districts.

A wide range of documents hitherto lying virtually undisturbed in the State Archives in Siena are analysed: from formal records that were drawn up by the *Consiglio Generale* (the General Council) and other official bodies in Siena concerning Francesco di Bartolomeo Alfei's government service; to the hidden and frequently coded messages embedded in neatly written ambassadorial reports despatched by Leonardo Benvoglianti from Venice and Rome. From hastily written words of warning about imminent attacks on Siena and its allies that were sent by unknown supporters of Siena (at times dashed off on mere scraps of paper); to Francesco di Bartolomeo Alfei's own personal papers (including tax declarations and reports sent back to Siena whilst he was engaged in service outside the city).

This archival material shows how throughout his life Francesco di Bartolomeo Alfei sought and accepted a number of official roles ranging from 'vicario', to 'capitano' (military captain) to 'castellano' (castle governor, castellan or overseer), to 'esploratore'. This latter office – which Francesco di Bartolomeo assumed on several occasions – involved charting territorial limits and the lie of the land, as well as the production of panoramic views and carefully orientated maps. Whilst no doubt useful to central government for the general purpose of taxation and the extraction of customs dues, Francesco di Bartolomeo Alfei's surveying work must



also have been helpful for the fifteenth-century Sienese military machine. Indeed, and as the book makes clear, the painter was engaged on several occasions in that guise in areas of active conflict between Siena and hostile forces to the south, west and east of the city.

The 1460 letter from Rigomagno offers precious testimony of Francesco di Bartolomeo Alfei's direct involvement at an early date in establishing order and keeping the peace in one of Siena's subject communes to the northeast of the city. In his official guise as 'vicario', the artist not only outlined the unrest in Rigomagno and the various factions operating there, but also identified the main miscreant, thus providing central government with the means to restore order. In carrying out official duties like this, Francesco di Bartolomeo Alfei clearly kept his ear to the ground; attending to the counsel and advice of local officials and in doing so establishing his own diplomatic credentials.

The Rigomagno letter prompted a number of questions. Was the profession of journeyman painter adopted by Francesco di Bartolomeo Alfei following the aborted commission to fresco the chapel of the *Fraternita di Santa Maria degli Angeli e Compagnia di San Francesco* in Siena a reflection of the artist's inability to complete the work the confraternity had asked him to do? Or was journeyman painting itself a cover for another kind of activity? The parallel image of Francesco di Bartolomeo Alfei perched on top of scaffolding, covertly looking down on the comings and goings of daily life below – whilst on other occasions engaged in specific and official duties as a government servant – prompted the present assessment of the ways in which such an artist could contribute to and become intricately involved with Siena's propaganda and diplomacy.

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Structure of the Book

The book is divided into five interconnected parts, in which previous analyses of Francesco di Bartolomeo Alfei's life and art are set against what can now be established about the different types of government service he became involved in, as well as his workshop training and the circle of acquaintance and patronage he established inside Siena and beyond the city's walls.

In Part One I attempt a reassessment of the artist's life and career against what can be established about his involvement in the visual propaganda, surveillance and diplomacy of the Republic of Siena during the second half of the fifteenth century. I pay particular attention to the politics of journeyman painting and newly discovered evidence of Francesco di Bartolomeo Alfei's direct involvement in government service from the 1450s onwards. I include here an analysis of the territorial hostilities and military engagements Siena faced around the middle of the fifteenth century and how Francesco di Bartolomeo Alfei became involved in such conflict. I also consider the nature of the alliance that was forged between the Ottieri and the Republic and how the government duties assumed by Francesco di Bartolomeo Alfei might have brought him into contact with that family, laying the ground for a future relationship with Sinolfo Ottieri. Centre stage in Part One is a consideration of Francesco di Bartolomeo Alfei's relationship with the Sienese diplomat, Leonardo Benvoglianti. In this part of the book I offer a detailed analysis of Leonardo Benvoglianti's diplomatic engagements and government postings in Venice, Montalcino and Rome. This includes a consideration of the content and nature of ambassadorial reports, fifteenth-century espionage and the duties and rates of payment of individuals assuming government service; ranging from couriers and undercover agents, to mayors and deputy officials.

In Part Two I evaluate the conflicts of interest Francesco di Bartolomeo Alfei may have faced, as he attempted to balance the pressures of establishing himself as an artist (achieving fame through fresco painting undertaken for the Franciscan confraternity inside Siena) against the demands of other kinds of activity that led him beyond the city walls in government service. Based on recent findings about Francesco di Bartolomeo Alfei's training as a painter, I consider how the young artist could have established a variety of career openings for himself inside Siena through neighbourhood contacts, family links, workshop connections and networking within the official government machine. Two specific themes are developed here: Francesco di Bartolomeo Alfei's involvement with the office of the *Biccherna* (the chancellery of finance) through his father-in-law Meo di Lorenzo and his marriage to the latter's daughter some time towards the end of the 1440s; and the workshop relationship the young Francesco di Bartolomeo Alfei is thought to have established



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around the fifth decade of the fifteenth century with Sano di Pietro. In an attempt to understand the links between these two artists, I also include here an analysis of two panels that are thought to have originally formed part of an altarpiece that was at one time displayed in the church of San Francesco in Grosseto. In parallel with that, I consider how Francesco di Bartolomeo Alfei's purported association with Sano di Pietro and Giovanni di Paolo during the fifth decade of the fifteenth century might have influenced the commission to him to carry out fresco work for the *Fraternita di Santa Maria degli Angeli e Compagnia di San Francesco*. Part Two concludes by illustrating how only a few years after initiating (but subsequently abandoning) the confraternity project, Francesco di Bartolomeo Alfei was already involved in serving the military machine of the Republic of Siena, in the guise of 'esploratore' – in effect, as an undercover agent or spy. I argue that this, along with a number of other recorded undertakings on behalf of the central government, not only compromised completion of the confraternity contract inside the walls, but also impacted the artist's way of life until he was well into his seventies. In effect, government duties trumped the wishes of the Franciscan lay religious.

In Part Three I focus more specifically on Francesco di Bartolomeo Alfei's connections with the Friars Minor of San Francesco: the emphasis there being an analysis of the reconstruction and refurbishment work that was initiated by the officials of the *Fraternita di Santa Maria degli Angeli e Compagnia di San Francesco* around the middle of the fifteenth century. In that context I offer a detailed description of two projects that were under way around the same time: a new altarpiece that was commissioned from Giovanni di Paolo and Sano di Pietro and subsequently recorded as displayed on that company's altar; and the fresco work that Francesco di Bartolomeo Alfei was asked to carry out in the same company's chapel. Apart from providing archival evidence to establish a clearer chronology for the carrying forward of both projects, the main aim in this part of the book is to distinguish the various confraternal spaces and furnishings that existed in the conventual complex of San Francesco at that time, as well as to demonstrate the growing significance of the confraternity itself. In this context I consider the involvement of two particular sponsors – Aldobrandino di Galgano Tolomei and Antonio di Francesco di Giacomo (Jacopo) di Lapo. I attempt to show how the donations of the first sponsor not only benefitted the confraternity's finances, but also increased its standing through the construction of a new hospital on the 'sacrato' of San Francesco. At the same time I analyse the part played by the second sponsor in financing the completion and furnishing of that hospital complex; laying the ground for yet further refurbishments and ultimately the grandiose sixteenth-century *Oratorio di San Bernardino*.

In Part Four, I turn to the circle of acquaintance and patronage that Francesco di Bartolomeo Alfei established inside and beyond the city walls in the aftermath of the *Fraternita di Santa Maria degli Angeli e Compagnia di San Francesco*



project. I concentrate in particular on the artist's association with members of the Trecherchi and Martinozzi families in Siena. In that context I attempt to evaluate the significance and location of the Trecherchi and Martinozzi properties with which Francesco di Bartolomeo Alfei was associated during the 1460s and 1470s. I consider how involvement with key patrons and prestigious sites enabled the artist to achieve the status of trusted servant: not only within Sienese society, but also inside government circles (one example of the latter being when Francesco di Bartolomeo Alfei was officially despatched by the Republic of Siena to the Marche in the spring of 1473). I conclude Part Four with a detailed analysis of the government postings Francesco di Bartolomeo Alfei assumed in Montalcino, the Val di Chiana and Vergelle between 1464 and 1489.

In Part Five I return to the question of Francesco di Bartolomeo Alfei's development as a professional fresco painter and the extent to which this was associated with his activities as a government servant. Based in the main on new archival findings, I show how, towards the end of the 1450s, Francesco di Bartolomeo Alfei became involved with a project to repair, reconstruct and then refurbish the bridge over the River Arbia, south of Siena. According to these new findings, the artist's brief appears to have been to fresco the walls of a new chapel that was to be built on the reconstructed bridge. In this context, I outline the relationship that was established between Francesco di Bartolomeo Alfei and the individual who was put in charge of the project some time around 1457 – Agostino delle Bombarde, Siena's official engineer and canon maker. I attempt to show how despite having abandoned the prestigious confraternity commission in Siena only a few years previously, Francesco di Bartolomeo Alfei was not only still active in the field of fresco painting at the end of the 1450s, but was formally engaged in work that was being overseen by the central government. I also offer evidence suggesting that the artist was well paid for his work; earning more *pro rata* than his contemporaries, Giovanni di Paolo and Sano di Pietro had done when producing the new altarpiece for the Fraternita di Santa Maria degli Angeli e Compagnia di San Francesco. I argue that Francesco di Bartolomeo Alfei's involvement in the Ponte d'Arbia project must at the very least contradict claims that following incompleteness of the Fraternita di Santa Maria degli Angeli e Compagnia di San Francesco project, he was condemned to a long career as an impoverished and relatively insignificant journeyman painter. Indeed, the conclusion I draw is that Francesco di Bartolomeo Alfei should be reassessed on a number of fronts: not only in the context of the commissions for fresco work we can now show he received, but also because of what emerges about the different kinds of service he offered to the fifteenth-century Republic of Siena.





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Introduction

Francesco di Bartolomeo Alfei has for long been considered a somewhat peripheral figure in analyses of mainstream fifteenth-century Sienese art; relegated to the margins of a greater artistic community that included contemporaries of his such as Sassetta, Giovanni di Paolo and Sano di Pietro. Regarded at best as a relatively minor player, no works have been firmly attributed to Francesco di Bartolomeo Alfei, although several paintings belonging to the Museo Civico in Siena and elsewhere have in the past been listed under his name.¹ (See Figures 1 and 2.) That said, Francesco di Bartolomeo Alfei was more recently somewhat precipitously thrust into the limelight (only to be just as rapidly despatched back into his box by leading experts in the field) in re-considerations of the identity of the so-called ‘Maestro dell’Osservanza’ and questions about the authorship of the altarpiece of the *Birth of the Virgin* which was originally displayed in the Collegiata at Asciano.² It is perhaps no coincidence, therefore, that an earlier attribution of the *predella* panel of the *Resurrection of Christ* in Dijon (now referred to as *Christ in the Tomb*) was

1 See, for example, a *Crucifixion*, a *Martyrdom of St Bartholomew* and a *Madonna and Child* recorded as belonging to the Museo Civico in Siena; a *Resurrection of Christ* in the Musée des Beaux-Arts in Dijon and a *St Anthony Abbot at Mass* in the Gemäldegalerie in Berlin. I am grateful to Alessandra Dami, direttore, Museo Civico e Diocesano, Montalcino and Veronica Randon, Museo Civico, Siena for help in initial attempts to track down works by Francesco di Bartolomeo Alfei. According to Veronica Randon, the only work surviving in Siena which might qualify for an association with Francesco di Bartolomeo Alfei is the *Crucifixion* in the Museo Civico with the seated figures of the Virgin Mary and John the Evangelist at the base of the cross and a kneeling figure in black and white robes in the background (tentatively identified as Saint Ambrose), which was undergoing restoration in the Palazzo Comunale in Siena in 2017. For a résumé of documented works by Francesco di Bartolomeo Alfei, see Alessi and Scapecchi, “Il ‘Maestro dell’Osservanza’: Sano di Pietro”, p. 29. See also, Garollo and Hoepfli, *Dizionario biografico*, p. 60.

2 Alessi and Scapecchi, “Il ‘Maestro dell’Osservanza’: Sano di Pietro”, and Falcone, “La giovinezza dorata di Sano di Pietro”. Alessi and Scapecchi’s assertions concerning the involvement of Francesco di Bartolomeo Alfei in the production of the Asciano altarpiece of the *Birth of the Virgin* gave rise to a number of different responses, many somewhat critical, if not incredulous. Regardless of the several questions about chronology and/or artistic competence raised by critics disputing Alessi and Scapecchi’s claims, there can be little doubt that the artistic style of those few works that have been attributed to Francesco di Bartolomeo Alfei (one obvious example being the Museo Civico of Siena *Crucifixion*) is comparatively softer and shadier by comparison with both the *Birth of the Virgin* triptych at Asciano and the wider *oeuvre* assembled around the ‘Maestro dell’Osservanza’, or indeed the work of Sassetta or Sano di Pietro, two other ‘contenders’ in the context of the Asciano triptych.



Figure 1 Sano di Pietro workshop (previously attributed to Francesco di Bartolomeo Alfei), *Crucifixion*, mid fifteenth century, tempera on wood, Museo Civico, Siena.



Figure 2 Anonymous fifteenth-century Italian painter (previously attributed to the 'Maestro dell'Osservanza' and before that to Francesco di Bartolomeo Alfei), *Christ in the Tomb*, c. 1435, tempera on wood, Inv. 1183, Musée des Beaux-Arts de Dijon.

changed from Francesco di Bartolomeo Alfei to the ‘Maestro dell’Osservanza’, before receiving its current attribution as by the hand of an anonymous Italian painter.³

Previous assessments of Francesco di Bartolomeo Alfei have depended in large part on the archival research carried out by Gaetano Milanesi and Count Scipione Borghesi and Luciano Banchi in the second half of the nineteenth century.⁴ In the eyes of Milanesi, in particular, it would seem that Francesco di Bartolomeo Alfei might best be described as a painter of little note and lesser interest. According to the handful of references that were included by that author in his *Documenti per la storia dell’arte senese*, the artist was more often than not engaged as a journeyman painter in the Sienese ‘contado’ (Siena’s surrounding rural area) and elsewhere, rather than in any significant artistic commissions inside the city itself.⁵ None of the former activities apparently brought much financial advantage. Indeed, on the basis of Milanesi’s account, the artist frequently found himself out of work and in straightened circumstances; with many mouths to feed; several daughters to find dowries for and rarely producing anything of artistic merit that might have boosted his finances. Nevertheless, it seems that Francesco di Bartolomeo’s apparent poverty was occasionally eased by his seeking and obtaining employment from the Sienese government to act as one of their officials both inside and beyond the city. When filing his tax declaration in 1465, Francesco di Bartolomeo Alfei referred specifically to the fact that he had seven children, that his wife was unwell, that his mother-in-law was old and that he was barely able to support them all, so small were his earnings. According to the artist, had the ‘Signoria’ not appointed him on several occasions as ‘vicario’, he would have landed up in prison.⁶ It seems that in 1465, Francesco di Bartolomeo Alfei was burdened with a debt of 120 *lire* (about 30 florins), consisting of different sums of money (each of two or three *lire*) that were owed to a number of people. Interestingly, in his 1453 ‘denuncia’, the artist had declared a very similar debt (of 30 florins, owed to a number of people).⁷ It is possible, therefore, that this was a financial burden that the artist had carried for over a decade and was still unable to resolve despite the government postings he cited. As Mario Ascheri and Petra Pertici point out, no individual could hope to be included in the electoral selections for either a major or a minor role as a government official, unless already a partial or full member of one of the ‘Monti’.⁸ Being eligible for consideration was thus a significant first step in seeking out

3 Musée des Beaux-Arts, Dijon, Inv. 1183.

4 See Milanesi, *Documenti* and Bichi Borghesi and Banchi, *Nuovi documenti*.

5 Milanesi, *Documenti*, vol. 2, pp. 227–29, 238–39, 299–300, 327, 329, 355–56 and 421.

6 Alessi and Scapecchi, “Il ‘Maestro dell’Osservanza’: Sano di Pietro”, p. 37, note 129.

7 Alessi and Scapecchi, “Il ‘Maestro dell’Osservanza’: Sano di Pietro”, p. 37, note 121.

8 Ascheri and Pertici, “La situazione politica senese”, p. 996.



government service. On that basis alone, I argue that Francesco di Bartolomeo Alfei merits further attention.

According to Milanese, whilst assuming various government duties, Francesco di Bartolomeo offered on occasion to ply his own trade, by painting the coat of arms and insignia of Siena on the portals and other public spaces of subject Sieneese towns lacking such associative identifications. Thus, reflecting those so prominently displayed inside the city in Francesco di Bartolomeo Alfei's own time and which are still visible today on the Palazzo del Comune and elsewhere.⁹ (See Figures 3 and 4.) Milanese noted that such work was to be carried out on the understanding that it would not form part of any official duty that was at the same time assumed by Francesco di Bartolomeo Alfei and the financial recompense associated with that ('salario et altri emolumenti'). Indeed, while engaged in journeyman painting, the artist would assume that he was exempt from his official government business. It seems that roles such as 'vicario' or 'castellano' were not only financially beneficial, in that they offered a salary and other benefits such as bed and board.¹⁰ They also provided opportunities in which individuals like Francesco di Bartolomeo Alfei could practise their own particular profession. However, an hypothesis raised and considered here is that – in Francesco di Bartolomeo Alfei's case at least – government service also opened up opportunities to practise very different kinds of skills. Not the least of these being to promote the cause of the central government in Siena through visual propaganda, diplomacy and undercover agency work.

Nineteenth-century historians such as Gaetano Milanese appear to have concluded that because Francesco di Bartolomeo Alfei was engaged in apparently menial painting work by the time he was middle-aged, any earlier success he might have enjoyed must have seeped away. A contrary argument is raised here: that it was Francesco di Bartolomeo Alfei's success in carrying out what was in effect visual propaganda on behalf of the Sieneese Republic that led to him turning his back on what were apparently more significant commissions inside Siena. In any event, and as the following chapters will show, Francesco di Bartolomeo Alfei had clearly achieved sufficient renown by the time he reached his early thirties to be entrusted with an artistic project of some significance: to fresco the company chapel of the

9 For a recent analysis of titles associated with the Palazzo Pubblico, in Siena and the suggestion that it should more appropriately be referred to as the Palazzo del Comune, see Ascheri, "Il palazzo del Comune".

10 For a consideration of the salaries and conditions of service enjoyed by 'vicarii', 'commissarii' and 'podestà', see Bratchel, "Vicars and Citizen Office-Holding". See also, ASSi, *Concistoro* 2388, 2389 and 2391 – three registers dating to 1453, where salaries for the role of 'podestà', 'vicario', 'castellano' and 'viarii' are listed, commune by commune. I am grateful to Mario Ascheri for pointing out that 'podestà' were normally appointed in those centres that were regarded as more significant, whereas 'vicari' were established in what were esteemed to be less important centres. This must inevitably have impacted on the amount size of salary received.





Figure 3 Sano di Pietro, *The Beato Bernardino Albizzeschi Preaching in the Piazza del Campo*, mid fifteenth century, tempera on wood, Museo dell'Opera del Duomo di Siena.



Figure 4 *Torre del Mangia*, Palazzo del Comune, Siena.

Fraternita di Santa Maria degli Angeli e Compagnia di San Francesco – a group of lay religious that was synonymous with the so-called Compagnia di San Francesco.¹¹

Although some historians have claimed that Francesco di Bartolomeo Alfei never began the fresco work in the confraternity's chapel, a number of records confirm that he did indeed commence work there: running up a number of debts procuring materials and colours, as well as receiving an initial payment for work already undertaken.¹² No clear date has yet emerged, however, as to when Francesco di Bartolomeo Alfei actually received this commission, or when he abandoned it. Reconsidering the surviving records in the *fondo* (archive) of the Fraternita di Santa Maria degli Angeli e Compagnia di San Francesco, I believe I can now offer a plausible time scale for this.

11 See Ceppari Ridolfi, ed. *Le pergamene*, p. 37. For a detailed discussion of the origins and history of this confraternity, see my forthcoming publication on foundation images and confraternal spaces.

12 See, in particular, ASSI, *Patri. resti* 208, fol. 19r. This 'entrata' page – headed 17 December 1454 and which appeared to remain open – was dedicated to the affairs of 'Francescho d(i) bartalomeio d(i) francesco d(i)pentore'. Listing payments made on the artist's behalf by third parties, it notes the outstanding debt owed by Francesco di Bartolomeo Alfei to the confraternity amounted to 32 *lire*, 3 *soldi* and 4 *denari*.

The dispute between the *Fraternita degli Angeli e Compagnia di San Francesco* and Francesco di Bartolomeo Alfei appears to have rumbled on for several months. Milanese noted in a brief aside (but without further analysis and as if that was the end of the matter) that by December 1454 Francesco di Bartolomeo Alfei was being chased by Lorenzo di Giusa – ‘notaro agli Ufficiali de la Merchantia’ – for not having continued the fresco work he had undertaken in the chapel of the ‘Compagnia di San Bernardino’ (sic).¹³ But my own reading of the dedicated ‘entrata’ page in question indicates that Lorenzo di Giusa received a number of payments in connection with his being employed (along, possibly, with other officials) to persuade Francesco di Bartolomeo Alfei through several ‘proteste’, ‘richieste’ and ‘comandamenti’ to come back to continue his work for the confraternity.¹⁴ It seems clear that this was no ordinary commission. The officials of the *Fraternita di Santa Maria degli Angeli e Compagnia di San Francesco* appear to have gone to considerable lengths to persuade the artist to complete the work in hand. There is also evidence to suggest not only that some complaints and requests had been made before December 1454, but also that the issue remained unresolved. That individual negotiations were protracted is confirmed by the fact that one of the payments made to the notary by the confraternity included what were referred to as interests and damages. However, despite Lorenzo di Giusa’s several attempts to persuade Francesco di Bartolomeo Alfei to return to the work he had left unfinished, he appears to have been unsuccessful. There is no evidence either that the artist ever paid back the debts he had accumulated in connection with the project.

In clashing horns with both the *Mercanzia* and the lay religious of the *Fraternita di Santa Maria degli Angeli e Compagnia di San Francesco*, Francesco di Bartolomeo Alfei must have found himself under the powerful glare not only of the city’s leading trade officials, and in consequence representatives of the central government, but

13 Milanese, *Documenti*, vol. 2, p. 421, no. 299 (note). Interestingly, the record published by Milanese includes the phrase ‘protestai de’ danni et interessi’, indicating that the dispute had been going on long enough for an associated penalty to be placed on the cards. For the workings of the *Mercanzia*, see Chiantini, *La Mercanzia di Siena*. Milanese also records in an unpublished note in his *Miscellanea*, but without giving a documentary source, that Francesco di Bartolomeo Alfei had ‘painted’ the confraternity’s chapel in 1454 – see Biblioteca Comunale, Siena (hereafter, BCS) Ms. P.III.44, Gaetano Milanese, *Miscellanea*, vol. 15, fol. 384r. See also Alessi and Scapecchi, “Il ‘Maestro dell’Osservanza’: Sano di Pietro”, p. 37, note 125.

14 The dedicated page for the painter headed 17 December 1454 details first a ‘protesta’, or complaint that had been lodged with the artist by the officials of the *Mercanzia* and which had been recorded in the books of the notary Lorenzo di Giusa. This complaint was apparently then followed by ‘piu’ richieste’ (several requests) made by the same Lorenzo. Yet further requests followed for which payment was recorded in respect of two individuals other than Lorenzo di Giusa. It was only after this, that a ‘comandamento’ (command) was lodged by Lorenzo di Giusa, with an ensuing payment of 2 *soldi* (in fact entered as 2 *soldi*, 8 *denari* in the marginal figures) that was paid to him on 23 May.



also of the friars of San Francesco.¹⁵ Yet, and on the basis of Milanese's published findings, it is as if Francesco di Bartolomeo Alfei moved seamlessly and without recrimination from initiating work on the *Fraternita di Santa Maria degli Angeli e Compagnia di San Francesco* confraternity chapel to journeyman painting work outside the city, engaged by officials in central government to apply the Sienese coat of arms on the walls of subject communes in Sienese territory. In fact, evidence I consider in this book indicates that the commission to work for the *Fraternita di Santa Maria degli Angeli e Compagnia di San Francesco* was not the last significant piece of fresco work Francesco di Bartolomeo Alfei was involved in during his very long career.

I argue that – rather than indicating a decline in the artist's fortunes – Francesco di Bartolomeo Alfei's journeyman painting and other undertakings on behalf of the central government around the middle of the 1450s opened up a lifetime of new opportunities for him; not least in the context of the military and political strategies in which the Republic of Siena was embroiled during that time.

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15 In this context, see Chiantini, *La Mercanzia* and, in particular the point made by Mario Ascheri in presenting that volume that the *Mercanzia* as an institution was separate from the state (or commune of Siena), but linked to it 'in a million ways'. Indeed, Ascheri's reference to the *Mercanzia* as an 'ente pubblico, di governo dell'economia e centro corporativo, di convergenza e di unificazione delle associazioni imprenditoriali', places it fair and squarely between an independent trade union body and government department.

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